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# Late Virginia Woolf

Anna Snaith

## Abstract

This article considers Virginia Woolf's late writing—*The Years*, *Three Guineas*, and *Between the Acts*—in the context of recent shifts within modernist studies. It examines a range of scholarly narratives about this period of Woolf's writing, arguing for the importance of considering these three works alongside one another. Faced with the rise of fascism and the onset of World War II, Woolf became increasingly concerned not only with political change, but also with the forms and modes through which the sociopolitical is represented. Her own pacifist, feminist interrogation of the forces of tyranny at home and abroad led her to test out different genres and media as a response to political crisis. In particular, her late writing is characterized by a desire to defamiliarize conventional (whether militaristic or misogynist) ways of seeing and thinking.

## Keywords

Virginia Woolf, modernism, *The Years*, *Three Guineas*, *Between the Acts*, World War II, Spanish Civil War, fascism, Englishness

Scholars of literary modernism have been engaged in much self-scrutiny of late. The field has undergone something of a revolution, resulting in the “new modernist studies” and characterized by various elongating moves. The horizons of what constitutes “modernism” have been enlarged geographically, temporally, and stylistically (see Mao and Walkowitz 2008). We have seen a welcome relinquishing or loosening of definitions

based on certain formal properties shorn of any political import and a shake-up of the conventional canon of Anglo-American modernists, with attention now being paid to a range of colonial writers. Instead, scholars have tended to characterize modernist literature via its critical, yet also complicit, response to capitalist modernity, or as a mode of “disconsolation” (Lazarus 2005, 432). One notable feature of the reconfigured terrain is renewed debate about the endpoint of modernism and a subsequent rethinking of categories that follow: the postmodern or the postcolonial. Greater awareness of colonial modernisms, for example, has illuminated many early twentieth-century texts as forerunners of postcolonial writing rather than necessarily emerging out of an imperialist modernism. If modernist literature is read as a response to the crisis of empire (e.g., Gikandi 1996), then the post–World War II period of decolonization may represent instead a continuation of modes inaugurated in the earlier part of the century (see Gilmour and Schwarz 2011). If postmodernism relied, for its energy, on an oppositional relationship to a now outmoded definition of modernism as elitist and avant gardist, then the “post” starts to look rather different. Certainly a substantial body of scholarship on modernist writers’ reliance on and awareness of market economics and popular cultural modes has complicated the traditional distinction between modernist and postmodernist. Scholarship has focused instead on the afterlives of modernism or the congruence between modernist and contemporary writers (see James 2012a and 2012b).

This raises the question of how one might define or delimit “late modernism,” a formulation that has received increased attention over the last couple of decades. In his study of the topic, Tyrus Miller argues that “shifting hierarchies within the arts, intensive development of the mass media, and traumatic events of social and political history” put

pressure on the notion of the individual artist and on avant garde experimentalism (1999, 24). Miller focuses on the “double life” of a body of writing notable for its signs of both decay and renewal (7). Confidence in ideas of the artist-hero or notions of symbolic unity waned, he argues, as modernism gave way to the postmodern. More recently, Fredric Jameson and Susan Sheridan have called for attention to a Cold War modernism extending well into the postwar period in order to account for writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and Christina Stead (Jameson 2002; Sheridan 2009). Thomas S. Davis has suggested that a “robustly conceptualised” late modernism allows for the “recovery of fugitive writers, movements, and artworks, enhancing the scope and depth of literary innovation in midcentury Britain” and also “allows us to retell with greater precision the story of modernism’s rise, mutation, and dogged persistence over the course of the long 20th century” (2012, 326–327). A wealth of scholarship on the writing of World War II (see Feigel 2013; Mellor 2011; McKay 2007) has convincingly posited modernism’s continuation beyond the 1930s and into the 1940s and 1950s. Leo Mellor, for example, argues that modernist literature’s “proleptic” preoccupation with ruins and fragments makes necessary the insistence on modernism as an “active form” in World War II writing, rather than a “dissipating, ebbing, and—ultimately—reactionary ideology” (Mellor 2011, 4–5).

This increased self-consciousness about what modernism is, and consequently when or whether it ends, is pertinent to our subject matter here: the late writing of Virginia Woolf. These reconfigurations have impacted the way in which Woolf has been read and the hierarchies and trends within her own oeuvre. Any notion of “late” Woolf is, of course, complicated and retrospectively defined by her suicide in 1941. Fifty-nine

when she died, her writing in the 1930s was not dominated by those concerns often associated with late style: mortality, summation, or culmination. My attention is focused on her major works from the mid-1930s onward: *The Years* (1937), *Three Guineas* (1938), and the posthumously published *Between the Acts* (1941), as well as essays such as “The Leaning Tower” (1940) and “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940). In line with wider changes in modernist studies, the conventional narrative of an experimental high modernist who turned to the political sphere in the 1930s has given way to a reading of Woolf as a novelist who from the outset was a keen observer of the sociopolitical. Alice Wood, for example, has recently explored what she calls Woolf’s late cultural criticism, arguing that her late texts offer “an extension of rather than a departure from, the innovative feminist politics and aesthetic experimentation of her earlier writings” (2013, 4). By carefully tracing the roots of these late major texts in Woolf’s earliest and earlier projects, Wood suggests that the “close relationship between formal and political radicalism in Woolf’s early and late works undermines the integrity of viewing her oeuvre in two distinct phases, the modernist 1920s and the socially engaged 1930s” (3).

While Wood is quite right to warn against overly schematized categorizations of Woolf’s oeuvre, I want to suggest that the changing political climate of the 1930s and 1940s led to several particular tendencies in her late writing. It gave an immediacy and urgency to her engagement with the political, and it led to an intensified concern with sociopolitical change and the modes by which it is narrativized. She responded to the rise of fascism at home and on the continent by researching and attempting to understand the causes and effects of the situation in Europe. She became equally concerned with Britishness, reading scores of memoirs and histories of England. She filled scrapbooks

with images and newspaper clippings as she sought to document the state of British society. In order to better understand the changing political landscape and to envisage possible futures, she set out to interrogate the shifting formations of national identity.

Englishness was under increased scrutiny, but invariably in an outward-looking context of transnationalism. She found abhorrent the exclusive and violent versions of nationalism emerging on the continent, as she did the manifestations of patriotic nationalism so pervasive in wartime Britain. A lifelong pacifist feminist, these areas became increasingly intertwined as she turned her attention to two related questions: the connections between fascist misogyny and the situation of women in Britain, and the potential to harness women's marginality to think outside militaristic ways of being. This meant a thoroughgoing consideration of women's public position and the limitations on their freedom of speech. Whereas her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) considered women's physical, financial, and intellectual autonomy from the point of view of creative expression, *Three Guineas* (1938) investigated the extent to which women were able to speak out against war. In "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," she reflects on the expressive outlets available to women. "Ideas" are still available to them, but "all the idea makers who are in a position to make ideas effective are men" (Woolf 2011b, 242). "Mental fight means thinking against the current, not with it", she continues, "[t]hat current flows fast and furious. It issues in a spate of words from the loudspeakers and the politicians" (243). From the mid-1930s onward, in a context of censorship, propaganda, and heightened concern among writers about intellectual and artistic freedoms, the need for women to be able to voice their opinions became ever more urgent.

What also marks out this late phase, then, is not a turn to the political at the expense of form, but a hyperconsciousness of form and genre. This period sees her testing out different (often contrasting) modes of response to political crisis. From the novel-essay to the novel-play, she employs a range of hybrid genres as she attempts to defamiliarize conventional ways of seeing and thinking. This often means using topical or familiar ways of telling narratives about a family, a nation, or a culture—such as the family saga novel or the village pageant—only to dissolve or reinvent them. With *The Years*, for example, she uses an ostensibly realist, historical novel, which traces multiple generations of the Pargiter family from 1880 to the “present day,” to complicate ideas of chronological or progressive histories. This conjunction of repetition and newness also pertains to her representations of war in this period. In *Between the Acts*, set in an English village on a summer day in 1939, conflict is depicted as repetitive (even cyclical) alongside an awareness of the particularities of the war imminent in the novel but under way as she was writing. The rise of the fascist dictator and the emergence of total war, as so horrifyingly apparent during the Spanish Civil War, together with new levels of war reporting and public awareness of violence, converged to make World War II a very different kind of conflict. Images and instances of violence recur in these late works, but are invariably suppressed, anticipated, or set alongside the everyday. Often violence appears as a bodily trace or metonym in the form of scars, disfigurement, or signs marked up on walls.

Repeatedly in Woolf’s writing of this period we find her working across media, especially visual media. Several scholars have recently explored the influence of cinema on Woolf’s writing, particularly the cinematic qualities of *The Years* (see Trotter 2007;

Marcus 2010; Feigel 2010). From the use of and reference to photographs and photojournalism in *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, to the performative elements of *Between the Acts*, Woolf was responding to the rise of audiovisual technologies for propagandistic and militaristic purposes in Britain and on the continent. This fascination with forms of representation works even at the level of the linguistic. For John Whittier-Ferguson, *Between the Acts* shows us linguistic stagnation and repetition: “the minima of language, all that was discarded or spectacularly repurposed by high modernism: catch-phrases, clichés, conversational filler, recycled parts of other books, cultural commonplaces—the devices that allow articulation to go on, even when there’s not much new to say” (2011, 248). Where Whittier-Ferguson finds exhausted prose, other critics find Woolf demonstrating linguistic transformation and renewal, as at the close of the novel: “Words of one syllable sank down into the mud . . . The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning- wonderful words” (Woolf 2011a, 152). With language so blatantly employed in the service of state propaganda—and thereby forced to sit still—in *Between the Acts* words are shown also to renew and unsettle: “It didn’t matter what the words were; or who sang what. Round and round they whirled, intoxicated by the music” (Woolf 2011a, 68). In passages such as “quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united,” we watch and hear words, syllables, and sounds repeating, reforming, and metamorphosing (135). As Christine Froula puts it, Woolf’s “virtuosic interplay of utterance, conversation, silent reflection and communication, reported speech, citation, the written word in books and newspapers, talking objects and rooms, scripts, and



performance” operate as though “language were throwing off mundane functionality and aspiring to the condition of music” (2005, 302).

A preoccupation during this late phase was the possibility of thinking and living differently. One of Woolf’s favored images in the 1930s is the procession. *Three Guineas* includes photographs of the processions she describes in the text: “our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities . . . ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practicing medicine, transacting business, making money. It is a solemn sight always—a procession, like a caravanserai crossing the desert” (Woolf 2001, 57). One of the early titles for *The Years* was “The Caravan” (Woolf 1982, 274), and this text opens as follows: “Interminable processions of shoppers in the West End, of business men in the East, paraded the pavements, like caravans perpetually marching” (Woolf 2012, 3). The Pargiter family enacts this conformity: sons who follow their fathers into the army, law, or colonial service. The nursery rhyme, “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush” echoes through *Three Guineas* alongside images of processual caterpillars forced to circle “head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property” (Woolf 2001, 70). Peggy says of her brother North in *The Years*: “You’ll write one little book, and then another little book . . . instead of living differently” (Woolf 2012, 352). Woolf uses small-scale instances of Bertolt Brecht’s contemporaneous concept, *Verfremdungseffekt*, to jolt her readers into new ways of seeing. At the end of the village pageant in *Between the Acts* the actors hold tin cans, candlesticks, and mirrors up to the audience, creating a three-dimensional, impromptu cubist painting (Woolf 2011a, 132). The audience contemplate themselves, fragmented, distorted, and revealed, as the barriers between art and the everyday, between human and

animal (“Consider the dogs”), and between friend and enemy (“Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers”) are suspended in that moment of exposure (Woolf 2011, 134).

Throughout the novel, and the pageant within it, the amateur cast members both ventriloquise other voices as well as swerving from their lines by misremembering or deliberately altering them. In the moment of familiarity or comfort comes the jolt.

In discussing critical trends and approaches to “late Woolf,” I want to underscore the importance of reading these texts alongside one another. While many recent scholars have taken this approach (e.g., Spiro, Wood, Froula, Cole), this was not always the case. Earlier scholarship tended to read either *The Years* or *Between the Acts* as anomalous in Woolf’s oeuvre. *The Years* was conventionally seen as Woolf’s return to the Victorian realist novel, the failure of which led to a radically different and compensatory vision with *Between the Acts*. Her last novel has been read either as a turn inward to a more conservative, nostalgic, or patriotic vision, as we shall see, or as an articulation of a consolidated “vision” and her “real” response to war, whether this entails the failure or redemption of art. Perhaps in response to its finality, critics of *Between the Acts* seem particularly keen to attribute authorial intention, often missing her characteristic ironic and perspectival distancing techniques. I consider these two novels as responding in differing ways to similar concerns, thus highlighting Woolf’s alertness in this period to the politics of form, or the forms of the political.

Before turning in more detail to the criticism, I briefly sketch the composition history and political background to this phase of Woolf’s writing life (for more in-depth composition histories, see Woolf 2001, 2011a, and 2012). In October 1932 Woolf started work on a novel-essay called “The Pargiters.” Her project was to investigate English

society, particularly the place of women, by telling the story of an ordinary, middle-class family from the Victorian period to the 1930s (Woolf 2012, xxxix). By 1933 she had decided to leave out the “interchapters—compacting them in the text” (Woolf 1982, 146), and the project had become a novel. But it was always a novel based on historical research: the “torrent of fact” she’d been collecting “these 20 years” (Woolf 1982, 133). She read and made notes on histories of England (such as R. H. Gretton’s *A Modern History of the English People 1880–1922*) and read scores of Victorian memoirs (such as Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s *A Writer’s Recollections*) and biographies (e.g., of educational reformers such as Emily Davies and Anne Jemima Clough) (Woolf 2012, liii-lxi). In order to understand the present day, she wrote, we must become “the people that we were two or three generations ago” (Woolf 2012, l). Among this reading and research were three scrapbooks compiled between 1931 and 1937, which she filled with images, quotations, and clippings, many of which make their way explicitly or implicitly into *The Years* and *Three Guineas*. Here we see the sociological motivation behind the writing project: she collects quotes on women’s education, employment, dress, and family life, the majority of which indicate a pervasive misogyny and resistance to female equality (Woolf 2012, li–liii). By September 1934 she had finished a 900-page draft that filled eight holograph notebooks (2012, cvi).

*The Years* was eventually published in March 1937 after a gruelling two years of editing and condensing. Its genesis and research process are intertwined with *Three Guineas*, conceived in January 1935 as “On Being Despised” and written in earnest in 1936 and 1937. The novel-essay turned into a novel and an essay, although she saw them in many ways as “one book” (Woolf 1984, 148). “I saw the form of a new novel,” she

writes in October 1937, as the ideas for *Between the Acts* begin to percolate (Woolf 1984, 114). The first draft of “Pointz Hall,” as it was initially titled, is dated April 1938; she starts work on it while waiting for *Three Guineas* to be published. The three late writing projects tumbled out one after the other, each precipitating the next, thus underscoring the need to view them concurrently.

The beginnings of *The Years* in 1931 coincided with governmental crisis, and its composition ran concurrently with Hitler’s rise to power. Leonard Woolf, through his political writings and activism, had intimate knowledge of the changing conditions in Europe, but husband and wife set out not only to familiarize themselves with the workings of European fascism but also to raise awareness of its effects. In 1933 the Hogarth Press published Mussolini’s *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*, and in May 1935 the couple traveled to Europe. They experienced firsthand the danger abroad (particularly for Jewish Leonard) when they were caught up in a Nazi procession and detained at the German border, surrounded by swastikas (Woolf 2012, lxxvi). Through her proximity to British fascism via Harold Nicolson’s early involvement with Oswald Mosley’s New Party (later the British Union of Fascists), Woolf saw close up what was happening at home as well as abroad. In 1934 she wrote: “They think Mosley is getting supporters. If so, I’ll emigrate” (Woolf 1979, 273).

*Three Guineas*, an antifascist, feminist, pacifist essay, engages directly with the Spanish Civil War. In June 1937 Woolf wrote in her diary about seeing Spanish refugees in Tavistock Square: “Spaniards flying from Bilbao, which has fallen . . . Somehow brought tears to my eyes . . . impelled by machine guns in Spanish fields to trudge through Tavistock Sqre. . . . A reason why we cant write like Congreve” (Woolf 1984,

97). That month, after her nephew Julian Bell had left to work as an ambulance driver in Spain, she sponsored and sat on the stage (along with Leonard, Vanessa, and her son Quentin) of the Royal Albert Hall at a meeting organized by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief in support of Basque refugee children (Woolf 1984, 98). Pablo Picasso donated a sketch of a weeping woman to be auctioned in support of the cause; when *Three Guineas* was first serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1938, its title was “Women Must Weep” (Spalding 2014, 155; Woolf 2001, xxx). The war was to claim Julian’s life the following month. When Picasso’s *Guernica* was exhibited at the New Burlington Galleries in October 1938, Woolf was a sponsor and patron of the exhibition (Spalding 2014, 155). Supposedly a nonjoiner, she signed up with several other antifascist organizations during this period, including For Intellectual Liberty and the International Association of Writers in Defence of Culture.

After the war began, and the Woolfs moved permanently to Sussex, the fear of German invasion from the south coast became a constant refrain in her diary entries. Her former house at 52 Tavistock Square was torn apart by a bomb in 1940, as was her final London home in Mecklenburgh Square (see Spalding 2014, 13). The war ripped through not only her beloved London buildings but also her writing. The planes overhead intrude upon the memoir, “A Sketch of the Past,” that she was writing in 1939, demanding a return to the present moment. The memoir, like *Between the Acts*, is concerned with ““scars” on the land and in the mind” (Woolf 2011a, xliii).

## Nation and Community

Inevitably, during this period Woolf’s thoughts turned to questions of national identity and community. Again, scholarship on this aspect of Woolf’s writing often separates *The*

*Years* and *Between the Acts*, the former shown to look outward in its investigation of Englishness, the latter inward. *Between the Acts* certainly grew out of her involvement with her local, rural community in Sussex and her perception of the effects of war on everyday life, both communal and individual. Maroula Joannou has outlined the Woolfs' ambivalent involvement with Rodmell village life during this period (see also Jones 2013). Between November 1939 and April 1940, Leonard gave twelve lectures for the Workers Educational Association, and in September 1940 Virginia led a discussion on "women and the war" for the Rodmell Labour Party that was to become "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (Joannou, 2012, 18). As Joannou argues, "Woolf certainly regarded teaching and lecturing as her own contribution to the war effort" (18). Her involvement with the local Women's Institute was more equivocal, but intriguingly she spoke to them in 1940 on her part in the Dreadnought Hoax, a prank from 1910 whose subversive antics were aimed precisely at the military. When she was asked to write a play for their amateur dramatic society, she declined, "settling on a novel about a pageant play as an acceptable compromise" (Joannou, 2012, 19; see also Jones 2013).

In *A Shrinking Island*, Jed Esty addresses representations of nation and community in literary culture from the period 1930 to 1960. Countering the usual narrative of exhaustion or decay, he sees these midcentury decades as having their own distinctive features. In addressing "the blank space or interregnum between modernism and postmodernism, between empire and the welfare state," he connects late modernism to emergent cultural studies (2004, 4). Writers of this period, including Woolf, turned inward, he argues, and investigated various forms of nativist culture. With decolonization and the fading of "English universalism" came anthropological attention to "English

particularism” (5). To elucidate this, Esty situates *Between the Acts* in the context of the late modernist revival of the Edwardian pageant play. With their roots in the passion plays, these were patriotic, outdoor history plays with huge amateur casts. While both E. M. Forster and T. S. Eliot wrote pageants in 1934 (*Abinger Pageant* and *The Rock*, respectively), Woolf chose to write a novel-play that blurs the lines between performance and narration. As Esty puts it, she wanted to express her “affinity for England” while avoiding the ugly nationalism of either the Edwardian pageants or fascist spectacle on the continent (86). The novel emerges out of a transformative moment when metropolitan modernism, focused around the individual consciousness, shifted to the “expressive culture” of the nation (107). The move is not one of substitution, Esty argues, but dialectic. Woolf was interested in the folkloric and ritual elements of this kind of public, communal theater (85), but could not invest unconditionally in innocent, rural ritual. The performance is interrupted, ironized, and always open to the wider “barbarized world of civilizational struggle” (97).

Esty gets to the heart of Woolf’s ambivalent, troubled representation of Englishness and her focus on community (“‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted” she wrote in her diary in relation to the novel [1984, 135]). But again his argument relies on reading the novel as a radical departure from *The Years*. Her penultimate novel offered “historical extension,” whereas *Between the Acts* served to “renovate novelistic form,” a form exhausted and outmoded in *The Years* (85). But from another vantage point, one can argue that *The Years* contains the seeds of *Between the Acts*, making it not such a departure. The scrutiny of Englishness in *The Years* always occurs in the context of a wider empire, whether through references to Irish Home Rule, trade with East Africa, or

the violence of the Indian Mutiny. It depicts London as a cosmopolitan city; the Pargiter family mingle with and marry people from Poland, France, India, and Ireland. In the 1911 section, however, set in rural England, as Christine Froula (2005, 256) and Mark Hussey (in Woolf 2011a, xl) point out, can be found the beginnings of *Between the Acts*. The villagers put on a play to raise money for the church steeple (Woolf 2012, 177). The section as a whole turns an anthropological gaze on Englishness: the big house, changes in domestic labor, and the role of the church. Eleanor is visiting her brother's family, having just arrived from Spain, and she sees the adherence to tradition afresh: "here it was always the eighteenth century" (176); the "past seemed near, domestic, friendly" (177). But this scene of stability is questioned and dislodged, just as tradition and ritual is interrupted in Woolf's final novel. For Eleanor, "England was disappointing, she thought; it was small; it was pretty; she felt no affection for her native land—none whatsoever" (179). Talk of Rose's suffragette activism and the "situation in the Balkans" suggests widespread social and political transformation (181). The section ends with Eleanor's nighttime awareness that "things pass, things change. . . . And where are we going . . . Darkness reigned" (192).

To investigate these two novels alongside one another is to further ironize Woolf's presentation of national belonging. Rather than a retreat into a comforting or insular Englishness, *Between the Acts* is part of an ongoing attempt to understand the means by which exclusive and aggressive modes of national affiliation take root as well as to recognize their seductiveness. And the novel looks outward as much as inward through its references to empire. At the heart of the pageant comes Budge, "directing the traffic of 'Er Majesty's Empire . . . black men; white men; sailors, soldiers. . . . All of 'em



Obey the Rule of my truncheon . . . Some bother it may be in Ireland. . . . Over thought and religion; drink; dress; manners; marriage too, I wield my truncheon” (Woolf 2012, 116–117). The names of the pageant’s director, Miss La Trobe and Mrs. Manresa, suggest, as Mark Hussey notes, a “colonial intrusion into this very English scene” (in Woolf 2011a, 186). Emma Sutton, too, has discussed Woolf’s carefully chosen musical allusions in the novel by way of demonstrating her “critique of nationalist (uses of) music” in both the English Musical Renaissance and the folk revival (2013, 120).

In *The Years* (as in *Three Guineas*), Woolf is similarly fascinated by the role of music (nursery rhymes, popular waltzes, classical music) in the promotion of nationalism. Even the wood pigeons’ repeated cry echoes an anti-Welsh taunt, evoking border raiding: “Take too coos, Taffy. Take two coos” (Woolf 2012, 66, 102, 159, 169, 390). Kitty attends the opera *Siegfried* at Covent Garden in 1910, an ironic foreshadowing of the nationalist purposes to which Wagner would be put by Hitler in the 1930s. While visiting her brother in 1911, Eleanor’s bedtime reading is from Dante’s *Purgatorio*: “‘For by so many more there are who say “ours” / So much the more of good doth each possess’” (191). Woolf was interrogating the divisive, limiting, and exclusive groupings of family and nation. As North thinks later in the novel: “If it were a question . . . watching the fingers curl slightly, of ‘my’ children, of “my” possessions, it would be one rip down the belly; or teeth in the soft fur of the throat” (343). Woolf makes the connections between ownership and instinctive or primitive violence abundantly clear.

*Three Guineas* too provides a trenchant critique of nationalism via an exploration of women’s oblique relationship to a national identity that changes with marriage: “What does ‘patriotism’ mean to her? . . . Has she the same reasons for being proud of England,

for loving England, for defending England?” (Woolf 2001, 8). Women stand outside as “step-daughters” of England, therefore have the potential to see beyond such groupings (13). *Between the Acts*, whose pageant tells the story of England through its literary rather than its military history, seems to be gesturing toward cultural affirmation (inasmuch as articulation or representation is a kind of affirmation), which is open to all. In her essay “The Leaning Tower” she writes: “Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there” (Woolf 2011b, 278). She projects a future less riven by class privilege in which common readers claim access to public culture, reading critically, voraciously, and eclectically: “Wealth will no longer decide who shall be taught and who not” (277). In these late texts, then, the nation and its culture are seen from the outside, open to trespass. For Leena Kore-Schröder, however, the invitation to trespass in this essay turns into a more reactionary, exclusive, and crucially anti-Semitic Englishness in *Between the Acts*. “The voice,” she argues, “the images, the literature, the culture of Englishness—is the very language by which Jewishness is silenced, evaded, forgotten and written out” (Kore-Schröder 2013, 55).

The pageant in *Between the Acts* brings together a miscellaneous grouping of actors and spectators whose communion is only ever intermittent: “Dispersed are we; who have come together” (2011a, 141). Like the Society of Outsiders in *Three Guineas*, Woolf was testing out the possibilities for community without cohesion. Critics have responded differently, often contrastingly, to this lack of unity. For Ben Harker, the dispersal signals a failed or “hesitant” collectivity that retreats back into private vision (2001, 451). He argues that the play makes use of agitprop conventions and suggests a popular front solidarity, but ultimately “imagines no future lived across class lines” (451).

But Woolf seems to shy away from any false, cross-class unity. As Lucy Swithin and Mrs. Sands, the cook, make sandwiches, we read: “Mrs Sands fetched bread; Mrs Swithin fetched ham. One cut the bread; the other the ham” (2011a, 25). The parallelism quickly moves into divergence, as Giles’s late train means one thing to upper-class Lucy and another thing to Mrs. Sands, who “whatever she might want to do, must wait, by the oven, keeping meat hot” (26).

Again, the dramatic element of *Between the Acts* can be found in *The Years*, which is also a kind of historical pageant. When working on the final party in the “Present Day” section of *The Years*, she wrote: “I want a Chorus . . . a song for 4 voices . . . becoming more & more dramatic” (1982, 236). It is an urban precursor to the pageant. The “miscellaneous company” meet in an office rather than the bourgeois home (Woolf 2012, 349). As hostess Delia notes: “All sorts of people were there, she noted. That had always been her aim; to mix people; to do away with the absurd conventions of English life. And she had done it tonight, she thought. There were nobles and commoners” (359). That may be so, but when the caretaker’s children are invited to sing for the partygoers, their performance is “unintelligible . . . so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless” (387). Projections and instances of cross-class and cross-generational communication sit alongside awareness of difference.

## War and Violence

*Between the Acts*’ comforting nativism is also complicated by its representation of war. Written during but set just before the war, it creates complex layers of temporal irony and a characteristically oblique portrayal of the prewar moment. Specific references to the imminent conflict are brief but ominous, such as the twelve RAF fighter planes that fly

overhead and cut Rev. Streatfield's words in two (138–139). Many of the passages of audience conversation are punctuated by references to war: "And what about the Jews? The refugees . . . the Jews. . . . People like ourselves, beginning life again" (88); "What's the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us?" (143).

Marina MacKay has argued that, like "avoiding history itself," Esty downplays this aspect of the novel in his focus on the nativist turn (2007, 16). For Mackay, however, the novel represents a shift from Woolf's "radical pacifism of the 1930s" to a "politically centrist" position (18). Her articulation of pacifist internationalism in *Three Guineas* is transmuted, for MacKay, into a patriotic concern with national heritage. Woolf goes quiet on questions of social injustice and "social class" (33), seeing this war as fightable and buying into the "mythology of classless civilian solidarity" (23). Certainly one could argue that the novel represents Woolf's most inclusive and participatory version of Englishness, but to suggest that it erases class difference in the interests of patriotism is surely to ignore the tensions and ironies at work. Also, given that Woolf started writing *Between the Acts* before the publication of *Three Guineas*, it seems strange that she would have had such a sudden political about-face.

Woolf remained a pacifist throughout her lifetime even though many of her friends felt that this was a "just" war. Leonard, for example, was to publish *The War for Peace* in 1940. She supported organizations like the Peace Pledge Union and the International Peace Campaign and wrote in her diary in March 1936: "Aldous refuses to sign the latest manifesto [League of Nations] because it approves sanctions [against Italy's invasion of Abyssinia]. He's a pacifist. So am I. Ought I to resign" (Woolf 1984, 17). And she was not alone. Friends such as Bertrand Russell and Aldous Huxley also

held to their opposition to war, and Woolf corresponded with Helena Swanwick, whose book about feminism and pacifism, *The Roots of Peace*, was published the same year as *Three Guineas*. Swanwick committed suicide when war broke out in 1939; Woolf would of course do the same two years later. As the war began, Woolf held firm: “It seems entirely meaningless—a perfunctory slaughter, like taking a jar in one hand, a hammer in the other. Why must this be smashed? Nobody knows” (Woolf 1984, 235). About patriotism she wrote: “I don’t like any of the feelings war breeds: patriotism; communal &c, all sentimental & emotional parodies of our real feelings” (Woolf 1984, 302).

MacKay also argues that the particularities of World War II are ignored in favor of an emphasis on primeval violence. As she reads it, the impact of the war is in some senses neutralized via a narrative of cyclical and inevitable violence. Sarah Cole has more recently historicized this aspect of the novel, arguing that Woolf was investigating the roots of political and cultural conflict in ways familiar within leftist circles of the 1930s. Questions about whether war was endemic or “violence can be the only route to peace” were issues debated frequently during this period (Cole 2012, 201). Woolf certainly juxtaposes references specific to World War II with images of conflict in the natural world (the snake choking on a toad) and with violence against women. This is a prevalent strand of her late writing. In particular, Woolf was concerned with excavating the ways in which boys and men are trained in competition and aggression. Bart Oliver violently subdues his dog, Sohrab, and is enraged by his grandson’s effeminate tears (Woolf 2011a, 9). The brief reference to the very real gang rape in June 1938 of a teenage girl by four soldiers of the Royal Horse Guards in a novel ostensibly about war is no coincidence (Woolf 2011a, 15).

Beneath the surface of a seemingly innocent ruralism is a novel riven with violence. This again creates connections with other late texts. As Sarah Cole argues, “the last three extended works of her career, *The Years*, *Three Guineas*, and *Between the Acts*, iterate and reiterate an increasing consciousness of overwhelming force” (2012, 231). But the violence is suppressed or submerged. Her late works “fixate on the permeation of violence into culture and consciousness” (37). Christine Froula, too, attends to the prevalence of scars as signs of trauma, like the scar on Rose’s wrist, “sign of an inarticulate loss that overflows mourning’s channels into self-mutilation and suicide” as a result of “dashed hopes, thwarted ambitions, and unspeakable knowledge” (2005, 240). Colonial Pargiter’s disfigured hand, from injuries sustained in the Indian Mutiny, speaks metonymically of the violent suppression of colonial rebellion (Woolf 2012, 12).

Violence in these novels is not only suppressed but anticipated or imagined, particularly in the case of aerial bombardment. Airplanes fly overhead throughout *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. In the 1917 air raid scene in *The Years*, the characters shelter in the cellar and anticipate violence aurally: “Then there was a violent crack of sound. . . . At any moment a bomb might fall” (Woolf 2012, 262–263). Elizabeth Evans has analyzed the panoramic section openings of *The Years* in the context of aerial warfare, arguing that they represent “an autocratic vision that purports to objectivity and universality” while exposing “the subject and fallible underpinnings of that vision” (2013, 70). Bart Oliver reminds the assembled characters on the first page of *Between the Acts* that “[f]rom an aeroplane” one could see scars made on the land by Britons, Romans, and Elizabethans (Woolf 2011a, 3). As Leo Mellor notes, the “vision is unmistakably aerial—and in being aerial it reveals historical continuities—and the

palimpsestic history of British vulnerability in war” (2011, 33). Woolf responded, in the perspectival shifts in her late writing, to changing aural and visual experience, particularly in the context of war.

Woolf was undoubtedly exploring Englishness during this period, but always in tandem with consideration of the victims of war and Nazism on the continent. She was not only borrowing books on the position of women in Europe from the Women’s Service Library (such as Hilary Newitt’s *Women Must Choose, the Position of Women in Europe Today*), she was also scouring newspapers for evidence and transcribing quotations about Hitler’s views on women into her scrapbooks and then into *Three Guineas* (see Woolf 2001, 50). Both Erin Carlston and Mia Spiro have explored Woolf’s familiarity with the implications of Nazism on Jews and women. Spiro has argued that it is more accurate to speak of Woolf’s anti-Nazi modernism rather than a more general antifascism (2013, 6), and Carlston examines “Woolf’s analysis of fascism’s origins in the material disenfranchisement of women” (1998, 137). Woolf investigates not only patriotism but its “sinister” complement, “matriotism,” “an ideology of motherhood that buttresses patriarchy and militarism” with its “idealization of maternity” and suppression of women’s sexuality (Carlston 1998, 7).

But her thoughts on militarism and violence also go beyond the specifics of the imminent conflict. A controversial aspect of *Three Guineas* is its avoidance of particularism. Woolf stands back from the most recent conflict (the Spanish Civil War) and the conflict on the horizon to explore the systemic roots of tyranny and violence. This may be read as avoidance, but the digressive structure of *Three Guineas* mirrors the issues that have to be explored before the narrator can answer the barrister’s question:

How to prevent war? In these late works, confronting Hitler means exploring the historic and continued oppression of women in Britain and Europe. As Carlston writes:

“Barbarism is not an aberration in the history of Western civilization but inheres in the culture of the fathers . . . the fight against tyranny demands a radical transformation of the world, *including* the individual and the private sphere” (1998, 154–155). Woolf explores not only the links between different kinds of intolerance, but also those between “Hitlerism” at home and abroad. In *The Years*, Eleanor throws a photo of Mussolini away in disgust, but Sara’s anti-Semitic reaction to her Jewish neighbor is echoed in the BUF graffiti chalked up on a London wall (Woolf 2012, 298, 306, 279). At the end of *Three Guineas*, the narrator describes an image of the dictator—“he is called in German and Italian Führer or Duce”—which quickly becomes “ourselves,” a figure to take responsibility for and which in turn can be changed by “our thoughts and actions” (Woolf 2001, 129–130). This is a controversial aspect of the text: both Spiro and MacKay have noted the problematics of Woolf’s comparison of the victimization of women and Jews, even if she was writing before the full implications of Hitler’s policies were known.

In her late writings, then, Woolf takes a topical but also historical view of conflict and violence, just as she takes a Janus-faced view of national identity, looking inward to look out. As Froula writes in relation to *Between the Acts*: “Far from a pure English pastoral or a retreat from Bloomsbury internationalism to insular, war-enforced nationalism, pageant and novel dissolve national, formal and experiential boundaries to ‘give to England first’ what their outsider-artists desire ‘of peace and freedom for the whole world’” (2005, 289).

## The Visual



Exploration of these issues meant careful consideration of the formal properties of her late texts. She continued to try out different genres and methods, paying special attention to the relationship between literature and the visual and sonic arts. Sound is crucial to the depiction of London in *The Years*, and *Between the Acts* is constantly attuned to the acoustic through the use of song and the gramophone. I focus here, however, on her engagement with the visual technologies related to spectacle and performance. Because of the centrality of visual iconography to Nazism, she responds with her own exploration of the connections between militarism and the visual. In *Three Guineas* she investigates the use of uniform and ritualized dress as markers of power and exclusion. This is exemplified in the unnamed photographs included in the first edition and depicting figures familiar to readers in 1938: Cosmo Gordon Lang (Archbishop of Canterbury), Gordon Hewart (Lord Chief Justice of England), Lieutenant General Baden Powell, and Stanley Baldwin (former prime minister). Including these photos, but not the photos she refers to of dead children and bombed houses from the Spanish Civil War, is a complex move. By using generic headings and leaving the figures unidentified, Woolf connects the topical and the general. The familiar display of power and authority in these images is defamiliarized through recontextualization. She also links peacetime and war by connecting the public male with the soldier.

To include the photos sent from the conflict in Spain would be to reproduce the very propagandistic effects she was critiquing. As Jessica Berman notes, the photos she refers to may have been those of dead Spanish children in the *Daily Worker* (November 12, 1936) taken during the bombing of Getafe near Madrid, which prompted Woolf to comment in her diary: “The Daily Worker article. Madrid not fallen. Chaos. Slaughter.

War surrounding our island” (1984, 32; Berman 2011, 65–66). Woolf could alternatively be referring to Republican propaganda posters, which used the same photographs and were sent to Britain and France to seek support for arms (see Berman 2011, 65–66). As Berman has argued, the domestic images “act as stand-ins for the images from Spain” while also alerting readers to the “difficulty of responding to images from the home front *as if* they were images from the battlefield” (63). Woolf’s use of metonymy, so characteristic of this late phase, both suggests connection while also highlighting and problematizing the process of simplification or equivalence. The noninclusion of the Spanish photographs refuses, in particular, the generic quality of images of war dead. It also refuses the incitement to arms that accompanies the photographs in the *Daily Worker* article: “Look on these pictures and resolve, blow for blow, man for man shall be our reply until the arms of democracy have won the only way to peace” (November 12, 1936, 5).

For Mia Spiro (2013: 16), in *Between the Acts* Woolf also counters the visual politics of Nazism to create an antispectacle novel. She includes many of the audiovisual strategies employed by the Nazis—pageantry, tableaux, and the use of gramophones and loudspeakers—but to very different effect. The haphazard amateurish portrayal of national identity and the use of breaks and interruptions mean that the audience is not entranced or caught up. Quite the opposite, in fact: they are at times bored and distracted (Spiro 2013, 42–58). Wardrobe malfunctions, forgotten lines, and the mooing cows erode any suspension of disbelief, as does the perspectival cutting between the actors and audience response. As Angeliki Spiropoulou has argued in a Benjaminian reading of the pageant: “Traditional ritual becomes inauthenticated in La Trobe’s contemporary

performance; it becomes secularized and demystified” (Spiropoulou 2010, 149). In 1939 Woolf was reading Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and was clearly preoccupied with communal thought. Leonard Woolf’s writings of the 1930s, such as *Quack! Quack!*, continually address such issues (see Woolf 2011a, xliii). This pertains, also, to the anti-Semitism in Woolf’s late writing: Sara’s response to her Jewish neighbor in *The Years* and the depiction of Ralph Manresa in *Between the Acts* (see Linett 2007; Spiro 2013). Debates about whether Woolf was espousing or exposing anti-Semitism continue (see 2013).

Woolf was an avid cultural critic in this period, committed to gathering, assessing, and reformulating cultural narratives about England, war, women, and violence. Her act of courage was, perhaps, not to project or pronounce. A novel is an “impression not an argument,” she wrote (Woolf 1979, 91). Both overtly and implicitly, she urged her readers to see and think differently, whatever the outcome of that difference might be. In his edition of *Between the Acts*, Mark Hussey reversed the decision, taken by Leonard after his wife’s death, to italicize the pageant (Woolf 2011a, lxiv). *Between the Acts* is, of course, an unfinished text (xxxix). This serves to further dissolve the “boundaries between the work of art and the world,” as well as to remind us of the significance of formal and typographical decisions to the creation of meaning in Woolf’s texts (Froula 2005, 305). Also unfinished in 1941 was a “Common History” project for which she wrote two unpublished essays—“Anon” and “The Reader” (see Woolf 2011b, 580–607). In the former, she imagines an anonymous, public culture that is not owned, sacred, or exclusive. As Jane Goldman has argued in relation to these unfinished late texts, Woolf emphasizes “collective participation in the making and remaking of art (canonical and

otherwise) by the living artist and audience alike, in effect dissolving the distinction between them” (2013, 62). In her aptly unfinished essay fragment “Anon,” Woolf offers a domain in which “everything is in supplementary process, unified yet not closed, where there is no transcendent (Hitlerian) author” (Goldman 2013, 73). The bounds of Woolf’s field of vision expanded in this late phase. She became even more eclectic in the range of texts she read and created and was testing out literary forms flexible enough to “give the whole of the present society” (Woolf 1982, 151).

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